



PH WINS

Pulse Check

Public health employees are feeling more strain than they were in 2024, with about one in three saying burnout (35%) and stress (34%) have gotten worse and 47% saying outside politics are negatively affecting their work. Younger staff are feeling this strain more acutely and are the most likely to say they plan to leave in the next year (31%).

- **Workforce strain is taking a toll.** When asked about what has changed since 2024, 35% report worsening feelings of burnout and 34% report a stress level that is worse or much worse. Nearly half (47%) of employees age 35 and younger report worse or much worse feelings of burnout, compared to 31% of older employees.
- **Political conditions are affecting the work.** Nearly half of employees (47%) say outside politics are negatively influencing their work unit's activities and 41% say their work unit's budget is worse than in 2024.
- **Many employees plan to leave their organizations.** 31% of employees age 35 and younger plan to leave in the next year, compared to 23% of those age 36–54 and 25% of those age 55 and older. 23% of employees age 61 and older plan to retire in the next year, up from 11% in 2024.
- **Opportunities for advancement remain limited and job instability has grown.** One in four employees report that their opportunities for advancement have worsened since 2024. Among those, 22% cite job instability as a reason for leaving, doubled from 11% in 2024.

In early 2025, the public health field was rattled by executive orders targeting organizations, staff, and funding for the health of communities across the nation and abroad. This increasingly led to interest in how the state and local government public health workforce experience has changed since the **2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS)** was fielded in late 2024. The PH WINS Pulse Check was developed to understand the impact of these external factors on the workforce's retention, well-being, and satisfaction. It was fielded in March 2026.

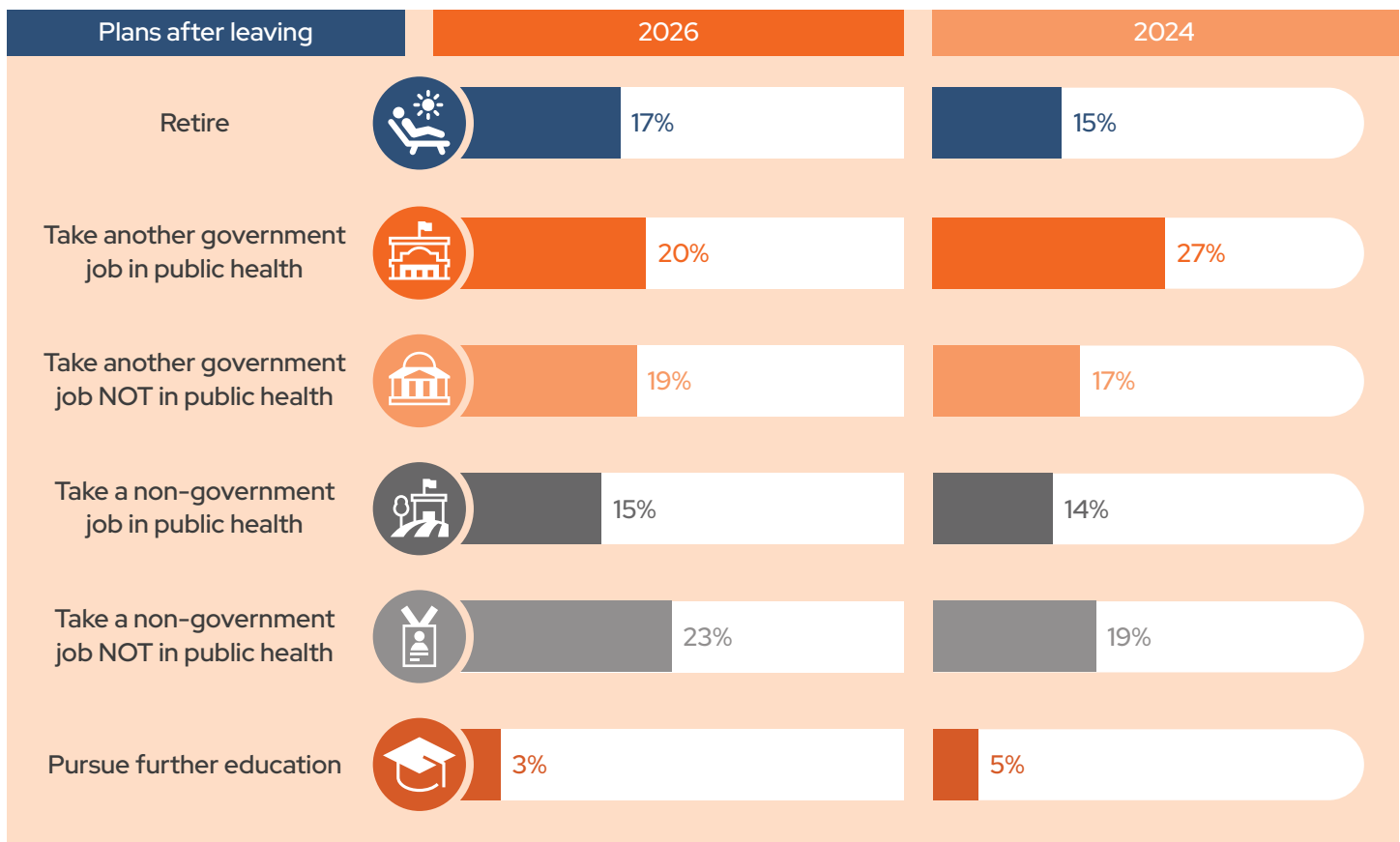
This data brief provides a snapshot of the public health workforce experience and assesses the impact of changes in conditions since PH WINS 2024. The Pulse Check was sent to a nationally representative sample of 13,486 state and local government public health workers who participated in PH WINS 2024 and was completed by 4,827 employees, resulting in a 36% response rate. It captured their perspectives on changes since 2024 in key areas such as well-being, job satisfaction, burnout, intent to leave, and workplace climate.

Key Findings

Many employees plan to leave their organizations, and their reasons for leaving have shifted since 2024

The workforce is currently young both in tenure and age. Many employees (53%) have been working at their agency for five years or less, and 70% have been in their current position for five years or less. Nearly a quarter (23%) are 35 years old or younger.

However, one in four employees plan to leave their organizations in the next year, with 42% planning to take another job outside of public health. More younger employees are planning to leave than older employees: 31% of employees age 35 and younger, compared to 23% of those age 36-54 and 25% of those age 55+. Additionally, nearly a quarter (23%) of employees age 61+ plan to retire in the next year, up from 11% in 2024.



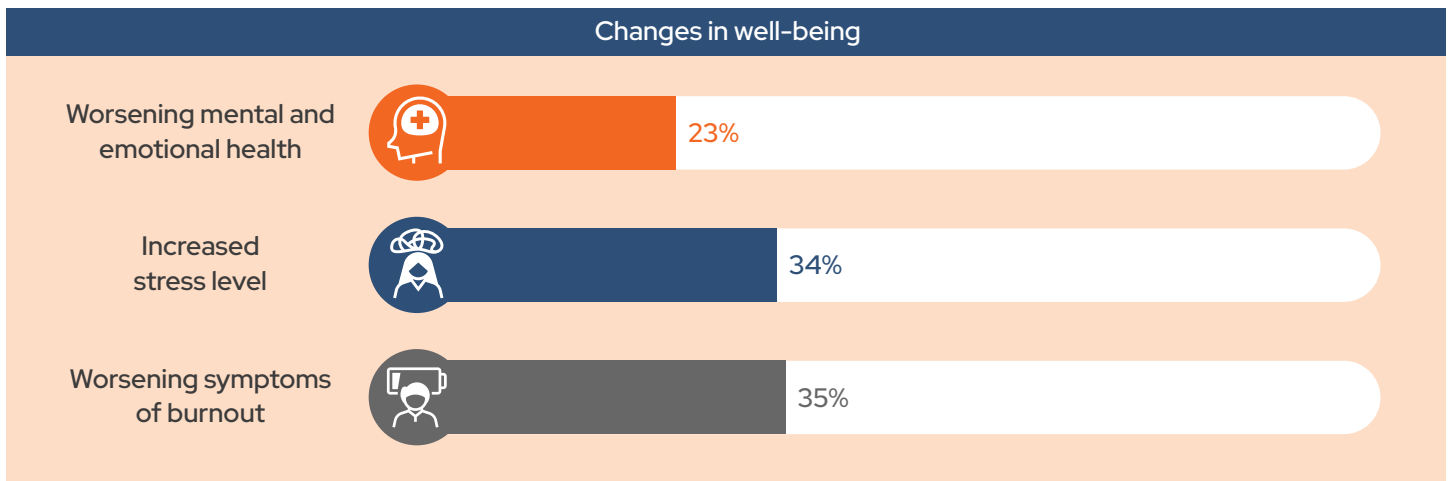
Among those planning to leave, 22% cited job instability as a top reason, doubled from 11% in 2024. Lack of opportunity for advancement remains a top reason for leaving, cited by 40% of all employees in 2024 and 42% in 2026; furthermore, one-quarter of employees report that such opportunities were less available in 2026 than in 2024.

On a positive note, PH WINS 2024 uncovered that benefits, traditional and non-traditional, were important to employees of all ages. In 2026, 79% of employees report their benefits as a top reason for staying, an increase from 70% in 2024.

Workforce strain is taking a toll on all employees, especially younger workers

Burnout was pervasive in 2024, with over 70% experiencing at least one symptom of burnout and one in five experiencing near constant symptoms. It remains a challenge today, with 35% reporting worsening feelings of burnout since 2024, 34% reporting increased stress levels, and 23% reporting worsening mental and emotional health.

Younger employees feel this strain acutely. Nearly half (47%) of those 35 and younger report worsening symptoms of burnout, compared to 31% of older employees, and 31% of younger employees report worsening mental and emotional health, compared to 21% of older employees.



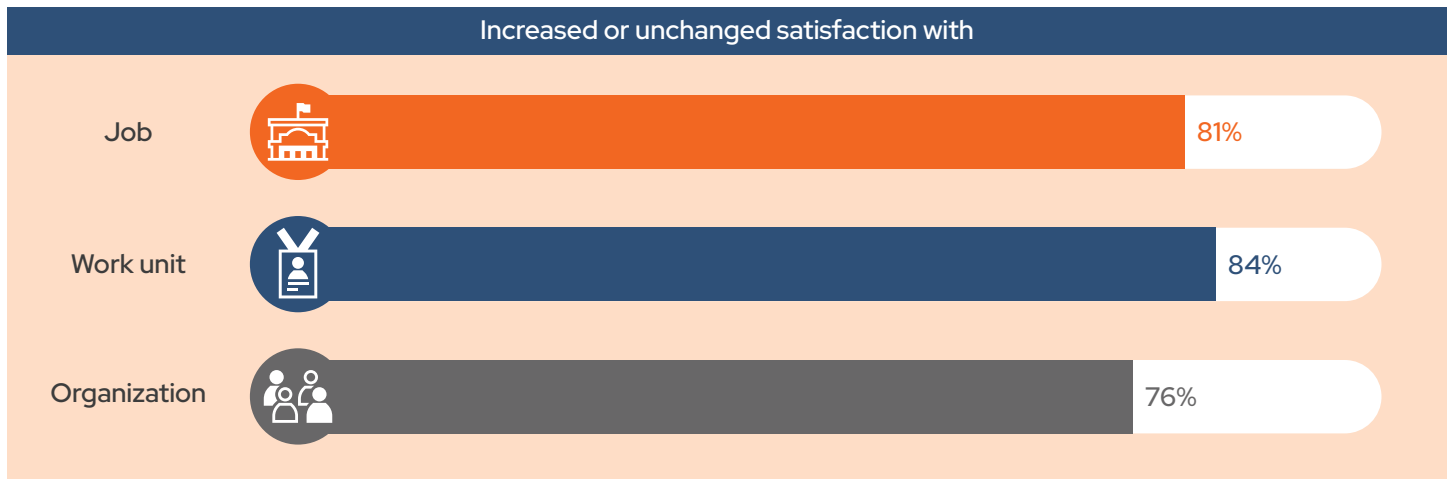
Political conditions are affecting employees' ability to do their work

Nearly one-third (29%) say their agency's ability to do its work has worsened since 2024, and 41% say their work unit's budget is worse than in 2024. About half (47%) report that outside politics are negatively influencing their work unit's activities, and 44% say information from federal public health agencies has gotten much worse.

More state health agency central office employees (28%) report that their agency's ability to do its work has worsened since 2024 than in large (21%), medium (16%), and small (17%) local health departments.

Satisfaction remains largely consistent

In 2024, 86% of employees were satisfied with their job, 87% with their work unit, and 77% with their organization. Health departments were concerned that added external pressure and less internal flexibility would significantly reduce satisfaction among employees, but this doesn't seem to be the case. In all categories measured by the Pulse Check – job satisfaction, work unit satisfaction, and organizational satisfaction – three-quarters or more reported no change in or increased satisfaction than in 2024.



Conclusion

The PH WINS Pulse Check was developed to better understand how recent external changes have affected the public health workforce. Findings show a workforce under growing pressure: burnout, stress, and mental and emotional health have worsened for many employees, especially younger staff; while political pressures, budget strain, job instability, and limited advancement opportunities are making it harder for agencies to retain workers. At the same time, most employees report that their job, work unit, and organization satisfaction has remained stable, suggesting that many workers continue to feel committed to public health even in a difficult environment.

These findings point to the need for both immediate and longer-term action. Agencies and public health leaders should focus on:

- Supporting employee well-being
- Improving retention strategies for younger workers
- Creating clearer paths for advancement
- Reducing uncertainty where possible

Just as importantly, the results highlight the need to protect the systems, funding, and workforce supports that allow public health employees to do their work effectively. Continued monitoring of workforce conditions will be critical to understanding how this moment shapes the future of the government public health workforce.

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